

50 Plus Ways to Help People Who are Homeless

The world of people who are homeless seems very far from ours -- but in some ways it is quite near. For many of us, the loss of a job, the death of a spouse or a child or a severe physical disability could be the route to total despair. These are the very tragedies that have happened to many people who end up homeless. Struck by personal tragedies, the people in shelters across our Fairfax-Falls Church community and America have lost their homes and been deserted by the families and friends they once had. **There are many ways you can prevent and/or end homelessness today.** No matter what your skills, age or resources, there are ways you can make a difference for people who are homeless and others who are at risk of homelessness. Take a look at some suggestions below.

1. **Understand people who are homeless** - Help dispel the stereotypes about people who are homeless. Learn about the different reasons for homelessness, and remember, every situation is unique.
2. **Educate yourself about people who are homeless** - A person who is homeless may be someone who lost his job, a runaway youth, or someone with a mental illness. One of the first steps in helping people who are homeless is to see them as individuals and to find out what they need. Notice them; talk to them and listen.
3. **Respect people who are homeless as individuals** - Give people who are homeless the same courtesy and respect you would accord your friends, your family, your employer. Treat them as you would wish to be treated if you needed assistance.
4. **Respond with kindness** - We can make quite a difference in the lives of people who are homeless when we respond to them, rather than ignore or dismiss them. Try a kind word and a smile.
5. **Know where to refer people who are homeless for services** - During regular business hours, call the Fairfax County Coordinated Services Planning (CSP) at 703 222 0880. After hours, weekends and holidays, call the homeless shelters directly. Homeless information and referral (I & R) services can be secured 24 hours a day, 7 days a week by dialing 211 or (800) 230-6977. Both CSP and 211 provide bilingual staff and/or interpreters for languages other than English. A list of all shelters and HOST regional sites and their contact information may be found online at www.fairfaxcounty.gov/dfs/factsheets/emershelter or the online Fairfax County Human Resources Guide at <http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/rim/>. Type "homeless" in the box labeled "Service Main Search". Also, secure a copy of Northern Virginia Regional Commission (NVRC) Quick Guide. This pocket size booklet lists public and private agencies serving all of Northern Virginia. Call 703-642-0700 for a copy of the guide.
6. **Volunteer or contribute money, food, clothing, household goods and other resources to homeless shelters, homeless programs or community based emergency food and financial assistance organizations** - A list of shelters, homeless provider agencies and community based food and financial assistance organizations are found on the Fairfax County Human Resource Guide at <http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/rim/>. Type in "homeless", "emergency food" and/or "housing" to identify public and private agencies.
7. **Buy "Street Sense"** - This biweekly newspaper is sold in many cities including the District of Columbia and is intended to help people who are homeless help themselves. For every paper sold, five cents is deposited in a special savings account earmarked for their rent.
8. **Take a little extra food along** - It's as simple as taking a few extra sandwiches when you go out. When you pass someone who asks for change, offer him or her something to eat. If you take a lunch, pack a little extra.
9. **Donate money** - One of the most direct ways to aid people who are homeless is to give money. Donations to nonprofit organizations go a long way. Visit the Fairfax County Human Services

Resource Guide at <http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/rim/>. Type in “homeless”; “emergency food”; or “financial” to identify community based organizations which provide food and financial support to people who are homeless or to people struggling financially to maintain their housing.

10. **Donate recyclables** - In localities where there is a "bottle law," collecting recyclable cans and bottles is often the only "job" available to people who are homeless. You can help by saving and donating your recyclable bottles, cans, and newspapers to them instead of taking them to a recycling center.
11. **Donate clothing** - During spring or fall cleaning, keep an eye out for those clothes that you no longer wear. If these items are in good shape, gather them together and donate them to organizations that provide housing for people who are homeless.
12. **Donate a bag of groceries** - Load up a bag full of nonperishable groceries, and donate it to a food drive in your area. Contact your local soup kitchens, shelters, and homeless societies and ask what kinds of food donations are needed.
13. **Donate toys** - Children living in shelters have few possessions. Parents who are homeless have more urgent demands on what little money they have, such as food and clothing. Donate toys, books, and games to family shelters. For special holidays, ask your friends and co-workers to buy and wrap gifts for children who are homeless.
14. **Volunteer at a shelter** - Shelters thrive on the work of volunteers, from those who sign people in, to those who serve meals, to others who counsel people who are homeless on where to get social services. A shelter can be as little as a place to sleep out of the rain or as much as a step forward to self-sufficiency.
15. **Volunteer to serve food** - homeless shelters and other local nonprofit organizations provide one of the basics of life, nourishing meals for those who are homeless and others in need in our community. Volunteers generally do much of the work, including picking up donations of food, preparing meals, serving it, and cleaning up afterward. To volunteer your services, contact your local shelter, food bank, Hypothermia center and/or religious center.
16. **Volunteer your professional services** - You can help people who are homeless with your on-the-job talents and skills. Those with clerical skills can train those with little skills. Doctors, psychiatrists, counselors, and dentists can treat the homeless in clinics. Lawyers can help with legal concerns.
17. **Share your hobbies** - Wherever your hobbies may be - cooking, repairing, gardening, and photography, you can use them to improve the quality of life for people who are homeless. Through hobbies, you can teach useful skills and introduce new avocations.
18. **Volunteer for follow-up programs** - Some people who are homeless may need help with fundamental tasks such as paying bills, balancing a household budget, or cleaning. Follow-up programs to give further advice, counseling, and other services need volunteers.
19. **Tutor children who are homeless** - A tutor can make all the difference. Just having extra attention can motivate children to do their best. Many programs exist in shelters, transitional housing programs, and schools that require interested volunteers. Begin your own tutor volunteer corps at your local shelter.
20. **Volunteer at shelters who serve women who are battered** - Most women who are battered are involved in abusive relationships. Lacking resources and afraid of being found by their abusers, many may have no recourse other than a shelter or life on the streets once they leave home. Volunteers handle shelter hotlines, pick up women who are abused and their children when they call, keep house, and offer counseling. Call to see how you can help.
21. **Educate others about people who are homeless** – When you do volunteer, you can become an enthusiast and extend your enthusiasm to others. You can motivate others with your own sense of devotion by writing letters to the editor of your local paper and by advocating housing issues at election time.
22. **Publish shelter information** - Contact your local newspapers, faith-based organization or civic group's newsletters about running a weekly or monthly listing of area services available to people who are homeless and in need or prevention resources and include organizational needs for volunteers, food, and other donations.

23. **Educate your children** - Volunteer as a family at a shelter or housing program. Suggest your children sort through their toys, books, and clothes they no longer use and donate them to organizations that assist people who are poor or homeless.
24. **Sign up your company/school** - Ask your company or school to host fund-raising events. Ask that your proceeds be matched to help those who are homeless.
25. **Recruit local businesses** - Contact local organizations to find out what is needed, approach local grocery or clothing shops about setting up containers on their premises in which people can drop off donations, ask local businesses to donate goods, publicize by announcements in local papers and on community bulletin boards and by posting signs and posters in your neighborhood.
26. **Create lists of needed donations** - Call all the organizations in your community serving those who are homeless and ask what supplies are needed on a regular basis. Make a list for each organization, along with its address, telephone number, and the name of a contact person. Then distribute lists to community organizations that may wish to help with donations.
27. **Employ those who are homeless** - *Help Wanted - General Office Work. Welfare recipient, parolee, ex-addict OK. Good salary, benefits. Will train.* That's the way certain high performing programs including Wildcat Service Corporations Supported Work Program invites the "unemployable" to learn to work, and the program works! More than half the people who sign on find permanent, well-paying jobs, often in maintenance, construction, clerical, or security work.
28. **Help those who are homeless and or at-risk of homelessness apply for aid** – Direct those who are homeless and/or on the verge of homelessness to intermediary organizations that will let them know what aid is available and help them to apply for it. If you want to be an advocate or intermediary for the homeless yourself, you can contact these organizations as well.
29. **Advocate for the civil rights of the homeless** - In recent elections, for example, volunteers at shelters and elsewhere helped homeless people register to vote.
30. **Join Habitat for Humanity** - This Christian housing ministry builds houses for families in danger of becoming homeless. Volunteers from the community and Habitat homeowners build the houses together.
31. **Mentor a family who has been homelessness** – Volunteer with a program which facilitates a family or individual's transition from a homeless shelter rapidly to permanent housing. Provide mentoring, budget training or counseling, employment assistance, furniture, school age children tutoring/mentoring and help with child care. Local groups include Interfaith Housing Ministries, and Community Ministries of Northern Virginia.
32. **Develop transitional housing programs** - These programs help people keep their current residences or assist them in finding more affordable ones. For information, contact the Homelessness Information Exchange at (202) 462-7551.
33. **Write to corporations to learn their affordable housing best practices** -- Some of the largest corporations in America have joined the battle for low-income housing. Through the use of the tax credit or by outright grants, they are participating with federal and state government, not-for-profit and community-based groups to build desperately needed housing in Chicago, Cleveland, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and dozens of other cities. Contact these organizations to learn about best practices.
34. **Contact your government representative** – an increased number of visits, letters and phone calls about a single issue from constituents indicate to government representatives its significance and beg their attention.
35. **Carry fast food certificates** – Carry certificates for neighborhood fast food chains to hand out to people who are homeless on the street and ask for your assistance.
36. **Donate proceeds from craft, garage and yard sales** – Solicit from your neighbors and friends donations of their talents (e.g. cooking, needlework, woodwork) and gently loved items to be resold as fundraising initiative.
37. **Give welcome home kits** – When a person who is homeless acquires a home, there are still many challenges. Small packages of items like cups, dishes, towels, etc. make this obstacle much easier.
38. **Take a meal to someone who is homeless** – Whether it is every now and then or on a regular basis try and take a meal to a shelter for those who are homeless.

39. **Organize a thrift shop** – To build inventory, collect gently loved items and solicit donations from churches and parishes.
40. **Enlist community organizations as advocates** – By enlisting social justice organizations as advocates for those who are homeless, awareness can be raised at a congressional level.
41. **Ask your clergy to help** – Ask clergy to get involved in community efforts to aid those who are homeless. Share best practice programs you may have researched.
42. **Suggest your faith-based organization take up special collections** – Suggest to your faith-based organization that special collections be designated to organizations in their region or community providing aid to people who are homeless.
43. **Encourage your children to educate their friends about homelessness** – Just as you can be an advocate for people who are homeless, so can your children. Ask them to tell their friends what they have learned. At school, your children can ask to tailor school projects, such as book reports or speeches, around issues confronting those who are homeless. The more children learn about their hardships, the more likely it is that they will pitch in to aid the poor and disadvantaged as a matter of choice.
44. **Collect toys and games** – Ask your children to sort through the things they no longer play with and make a donation of those that are gently loved.
45. **Prepare food and gifts** – Make a list of the food and gifts which young children and teens can make or collect to help those who are homeless.
46. **Donate admission fees from a school event** – Teachers and school administrators may decide to donate proceeds or some portion of proceeds from a school event to an organization whose mission is to help people who are homeless. Additionally, admission to school events may include can food donations as well.
47. **Birthday party games with a “giving” twist** – During scavenger hunts, challenge players to collect canned foods for those who are homeless, the poor and the unemployed.
48. **Support local food banks and food pantries** -- Locally, there are food banks, food pantries and shelters. Each welcomes and appreciates volunteer support and food donations. Lists of these programs are found in the online Human Resource Guide at <http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/rim/> to learn more about food pantries and soup kitchens nationally contact *Feeding America*. *Feeding America* is a national food bank network of over 180 local food banks that supplies shelters, soup kitchens, day care centers, senior programs, and other charities that serve meals. The food in this program is donated by restaurants, grocery stores, food manufacturers, and distributors, among others. The network program typically arranges pickups and delivery of the donations.
49. **Financial Support** - Give as much as you can. From \$25, which can cover the cost of food for an entire day for a family of three, or shoes for a child, to \$25,000, which can help keep a family in their home for two years, your donation to the **Fairfax-Falls Church Homelessness Partnership Fund** will directly impact our most vulnerable neighbors. This fund not only supports rapid re-housing activities, but also provides valuable resources that tackle multiple prevention issues with one single contribution. The Fairfax-Falls Church Community Partnership to Prevent and End Homelessness best connects you to both immediate and long-term needs of the homeless within our community. Your contribution to our Homelessness Partnership Fund can make a significant difference. Make **checks payable to the (Partnership to End Homelessness) PEH/CFNCR**. **Checks** can be mailed to the Fairfax County Office to Prevent and End Homelessness (OPEH).
50. **Share this list** – Spread the word by sending this list of “50 Plus Ways to Help the Homeless”.
51. **Send us your ideas** - Each of the creative and successful ways to help the homeless described in this list reaches a fraction of the homeless. But one by one, each effort added together will eventually transform our cities, suburbs, and rural communities into a society we can be proud of, where food and shelter is something everyone can take for granted. <http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/homeless>